



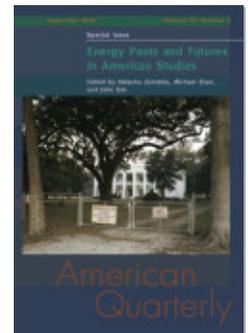
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Community Solar as Energy Reparations: Abolishing Petro-Racial Capitalism in New Orleans

Nikki Luke and Nik Heynen

In a June 2019 interview on WHIV community radio in New Orleans, Logan Burke, executive director of the Louisiana Alliance for Affordable Energy, detailed the work underway at the New Orleans City Council to authorize community solar,¹ which means “that rather than depending on the utility itself to procure renewables, a community can invest in and own solar resources and other renewable resources and reduce their bills, lock[ing] in the cost of that energy over time.” Burke identified the developments in New Orleans as a historic opportunity to bring policy innovations that work toward energy equity to the US South, as the rule is “the first community solar opportunity that anybody has seen in our region.”²

Community solar programs geared to low-income communities strive to address energy poverty or energy insecurity by working around the financial and infrastructural impediments for renters and other customers without adequate infrastructure or the upfront capital to finance a residential solar energy system.³ Customers can harness energy collected at a location other than their home by subscribing to a share of a community-owned solar array and receive credit on their bill for the power produced through their participation. Given the history of racial discrimination in home lending that is reflected in an unequal distribution of property ownership in New Orleans, and the US more widely,⁴ community solar is a concrete policy intervention with the potential to generate equity in access to renewable energy and reduce disparate energy poverty across racial groups in the transition to clean energy. Distributing access to renewable and affordable electricity through community solar challenges the fossil fuel infrastructures that contribute to energy poverty, housing insecurity, and climate vulnerability and confronts the power relations that sustain petro-racial capitalism in New Orleans. We focus on this policy as an alternative system of energy production and consumption that works to shift the extractive energy paradigm to a renewable and reparative energy system. Importantly, community solar is only a piece of climate justice mobilization

in the Gulf Coast, where Indigenous and Black communities are organizing for energy equity and self-determination in the transition to clean energy.⁵

Across the US South, Black political discussion related to reparations was established in “the land question” as a way to build the necessary assets to fulfill community needs and ensure self-determination after emancipation.⁶ As Manning Marable suggests, other resource questions related to land should also inform reparational politics. To this end he writes, “Energy—the technology to develop property efficiently and productively, access to cheap and renewable supplies of electricity, natural gas, petroleum, etc. becomes vital as more Black people leave the land and become dependent upon non-agricultural employment as salaried workers.”⁷ Marable laments that “the question of energy” was not central to Black political mobilization of the 1960s given its relationship to “the land question” and the disproportionate energy burden that people of color bear across the US in the face of patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism while abundant profits continue to be made by energy producers.⁸ These vast profits result from regulatory capture, as public regulators permit a generous rate of return for utilities and energy companies carefully use state and federal tax codes to leverage subsidies and avoid corporate income taxes.⁹ We understand capital in terms of energy and examine “petro-racial capitalism” as an accumulation strategy reliant on the production, distribution, and consumption of petroleum that both requires and perpetuates colonial dispossession and racialized accumulation enacted through processes of slavery, patriarchy, imperialism, and genocide.¹⁰ As Julie Sze argues, “Capitalism and carbon live out and through systematic dispossession, production, extraction, disposability—in short, death and violence.”¹¹

In Louisiana, seen as “America’s very own petrostate,”¹² racialized disparities in exposure to environmental toxins from energy infrastructure and the “fiscal geographies” of asset stripping, through tax evasion and subsidization, shape the spaces of energy extraction, production, and use.¹³ Clyde Woods identifies the central role of the energy sector in creating ecological and economic vulnerability through generations of dispossession, which he terms “asset stripping,” observing how oil production contributed to the destruction of Louisiana’s coast just as oil-fueled automobility also made possible white flight and the evisceration of New Orleans’s tax base.¹⁴ Across coastal Louisiana, Indigenous communities including the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, Grand Caillou / Dulac Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe, Atakapas-Ishak/Chawaska tribe, and the United Houma Nation have long struggled against the socio-ecological devastation wrought through petro-racial capitalism.¹⁵

New Orleans is an important site to understand the destructive consequences of petro-racial capitalism and ongoing resistance. In identifying the socio-natural relations connecting energy, housing, and climate change, Woods narrates a historical political ecology of New Orleans that made the city uniquely vulnerable to Hurricane Katrina.¹⁶ After the storm, substantial property tax credits for home renovation and residential solar energy, subsidized through severance and excise taxes, replicated asset stripping and propertied accumulation. In this essay, we read Woods alongside scholarship from critical energy studies that theorizes the central role of energy systems in shaping everyday life.¹⁷ “Petro-racial capitalism” joins these perspectives with insights from the Black Radical Tradition, and particularly Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, which defines capitalism as requiring and reinforcing the logics of racialized difference in exploitation.¹⁸ In expanding dialogue between these literatures, we address the interconnected socio-natural crises that produce uneven energy geographies to contribute to expanding the emancipatory trajectory of energy humanities.¹⁹

Building a “system of explanation that informs daily life” based in struggles of the Mississippi Delta and Black Belt South that he names “the blues epistemology,”²⁰ Woods theorizes a dialectic of plantation-petro control and Black working-class resistance to racial capitalism. We draw on this tradition to argue that reparations should be mobilized to imagine emancipatory energy futures built against the oppressive regime of petro-racial capitalism that city and state policies have normalized in New Orleans. Reparations, or the deliberate efforts to make meaningful material amends for the oppression done to African Americans through and since slavery, are central to abolitionist praxis focused on securing economic self-determination, addressing harms, and changing “laws, institutions, and systems” to ensure “that harm will not happen again.”²¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains that “if unfinished liberation is the still-to-be achieved work of abolition, then at the bottom what is to be abolished isn’t the past or the present ghost, but rather the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”²² To build on these objectives, we examine the energy system as a product of petro-racial capitalism that depends on regressive taxes and utility rates, exclusion from new clean energy technologies available only to homeowners, and the racialized designation of certain areas and people as “pollution sinks,” leaving a trail of socio-environmental destruction and unhealthy living circumstances.²³ Summoning the *longue durée* of Indigenous and abolitionist politics that informs ongoing struggles for environmental justice²⁴ and building on the recent calls to connect reparations to climate justice,²⁵ we

consider community solar as a starting point to implement reparative energy infrastructures and work toward energy reparations.

The Geographies of Petro-Racial Capitalism

To situate energy as a circuit of racial capitalist accumulation and to prefigure alternatives require examining the legal and political geographies that shape the energy landscape to enable dispossession and perpetuate uneven growth. Taxation is one element that buttresses the petro-racial capitalist system. Taxes serve a regulatory and redistributive function that can “foster or impede capitalist economic development and the reproduction of class inequality.”²⁶ As compulsory payments imposed by the government, taxes are “the primary means of redistributing social wealth and financing collective goods and infrastructure at a range of scales,” and thus a mechanism through which “power plays out unevenly across space.”²⁷ States leverage tax systems to incentivize socially beneficial outcomes, which, in Louisiana, have long been entrenched within the plantation regime and oil dependency.

In *Development Drowned and Reborn*, Woods traces enduring plantation fiscal policy that originated in the antebellum era when large sugar and cotton plantation owners dominated state government and used their influence to charge only “minimal property taxes.”²⁸ With the defeat of Radical Reconstruction following the Civil War, the plantation elite engineered fiscal mechanisms into the constitution of 1879 that directed state government to support their commercial interests and “reduced state taxes on properties that were already significantly undervalued by tax administrators, who historically allowed planters and commercial interests to escape payment altogether.”²⁹ The tax regime was central to white supremacist statecraft from the implicit subsidization of plantation agriculture through low property taxes to the 1 percent poll tax.³⁰ Regressive tax policies and property tax exemptions bolstered the rigid social hierarchy enforced by the Black Codes by facilitating wealth accumulation and disenfranchising African American and working-class people. Taxation further subsidized extractive industries while reducing funds available for education, social services, public works, and other collective infrastructures.³¹

The tax system conceived to maintain the status quo of plantation agriculture informs the governance of Louisiana’s oil industry and laid the foundation for fiscal policy to support petro-racial capitalism. In 1901, developers drilled the first commercial oil well in Jennings, Louisiana.³² The availability of inexpensive natural gas also prompted electrification.³³ Soon after, the first severance tax on natural resources, including oil and gas, was proposed to fi-

nance progressive public programs without increasing the property tax rate.³⁴ In the 1920s, under his “Share the Wealth” program, Governor Huey Long further increased severance taxes, “which made possible free schoolbooks for all children, black and white, rich and poor, in public and private schools,” and the homestead exemption for property taxes on residential properties up to a certain value.³⁵ Simultaneously, the oil industry received subsidies through property tax exemptions for new plant construction and expansion. This later “spurred the continual development of petro-chemical facilities” in “Cancer Alley,” the heavily polluted Mississippi River corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans where predominately Black and Brown communities live and have fought for environmental justice against the dumping of cancer-causing toxins.³⁶

Although the Jennings oil field wells reached peak production in 1906 at over nine million barrels,³⁷ petro-industries transformed the political economy of Louisiana, “replac[ing] the agricultural plantation culture with an oil and gas plantation culture.”³⁸ Michael Watts observes parallels between Louisiana and other petro-states, as “a living testimony to the petropopulism and oil-based human and ecological development failures that have typically afflicted oil-producing states in the global South.”³⁹ Petro-capitalist regimes exhibit similar patterns of socioeconomic underdevelopment, income inequality, poverty, corrupt and concessionary politics, socio-environmental pollution, and boom–bust tendencies that shape everyday life.⁴⁰

Throughout the twentieth century, Louisiana’s elite “ensured that oil revenue taxes and sales taxes would be directed primarily to maintain [their] monopolization of resources and political legitimacy.”⁴¹ When oil prices were high, new revenues were used to increase social and infrastructural spending central to social reproduction. During the 1973 energy crisis, the severance tax was adjusted to charge a percentage of the value of oil produced rather than a flat fee per barrel.⁴² With the subsequent 1981 crash in oil prices, oil revenue plummeted and “fiscal luxuries” were slowly eliminated.⁴³ The bust led to massive unemployment in the oil fields and exacerbated Black unemployment in New Orleans.⁴⁴ Woods notes that “even during oil boom periods, high levels of rural and urban African American poverty were maintained by racially discriminatory budget, employment, education, housing, health care, and environmental policies.”⁴⁵

Fiscal policy in Louisiana worked hand in glove with federal housing and transportation programs to eviscerate Black urban centers. Suburban development was subsidized through federally insured mortgages, income tax deductions for residential mortgage payments, tax-funded road infrastructure, and

property tax exemptions for new commercial developments. Mechanisms to stimulate oil-fueled suburbanization outside New Orleans were largely closed to African Americans, and thus

the movement of residents, business, employees, and the taxes they generated fueled both segregation-generated wealth and the rapid decline of the city's finances and neighborhoods. . . . The blockade around Black communities established by banks, insurers, retail establishments, and grocery stores ensured that revenue generated from purchases and sales taxes were directed toward supporting spatial segregation in the region.⁴⁶

The outward flow of people, tax revenue, and other resources, from these “racial-spatial enclosures (neighborhoods, regions, etc.), and for those economic sectors, occupations, institutions, and policy arenas where African Americans and subordinated groups are concentrated,” became normalized in New Orleans, which Woods terms asset stripping.⁴⁷ The reliance on regressive sales taxes, which, alongside oil revenue, continue to constitute the majority of state revenue, as well as “historic and widespread state property tax exemptions represent a major transfer of wealth to agricultural, business, and large property owners.”⁴⁸

Oil further lubricated and demanded “growth machine” strategies, as wetlands were sliced by a network of pipelines and shipping channels that were unnecessarily widened to attract federal money and stimulate property values.⁴⁹ Protecting energy corporations’ profits not only exacerbated racial inequalities in New Orleans but also increased the vulnerability of Black, Indigenous, and working-class residents to the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, made worse yet by climate change.⁵⁰ After Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana subsidized energy redevelopment in a way that replicated similar processes of asset stripping.⁵¹

In 2007, Louisiana state senator Nick Gautreaux cosponsored the solar and wind energy tax credit, asking, “Why are we just a leader in the fossil fuel industry? Why not be a leader in alternative energy too?”⁵² The tax credit initially received little attention, as the bill envisioned the total cost of the program would be five hundred thousand dollars. However, Louisiana’s consumer incentives were the highest in the nation, offering a 50 percent refund for the cost of installation on the first twenty-five thousand dollars of a residential solar system. Combined with the federal tax credits that offered a 30 percent refund, solar became a profitable investment for homeowners.⁵³ On top of already low property and income taxes in Louisiana, some homeowners who invested in solar were able to erase their property tax bill altogether, and after the seven-to-eight-year payback period, a residential solar system would

also eliminate most if not all of a homeowner's electricity bills. In addition, homeowners could see a return to their home's resale value⁵⁴ without concern about their property tax burden increasing given that residential renewable energy systems are exempt from property taxes in Louisiana.⁵⁵ Parallel to the historical exemptions by the tax commission that "often acted to ensure that railroad, pipeline, and utility properties were minimally taxed,"⁵⁶ the new solar tax credits envisioned homeowners as energy producers eligible for exemptions and rebates.

As a result of the tax credits, the solar market grew substantially, and by 2013 the program cost Louisiana more than \$40 million annually. The tax credit was amended in response to Louisiana's \$1.6 billion budget shortfall when oil prices fell in 2015, to cap the total amount of incentives available, scale back the refund rate, and phase out the program by December 31, 2017.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Louisiana invested more than \$147 million into residential solar infrastructure through this tax credit, helping almost fifteen thousand customers procure residential energy systems.⁵⁸

Many low-income homeowners were able to take advantage of the tax credits; however, in New Orleans, most of these residents worked through solar leasing providers. Solar leasing offers an alternative by which companies pay upfront for installation in return for homeowners signing over their state and federal tax credits. In New Orleans, 80 percent of all tax credits were funneled through one solar leasing company, which signed ten-year contracts with homeowners who then paid monthly flat rates to lease the panels installed on their roofs.⁵⁹ This approach offered a net savings on utility bills for many customers, although they did not receive the tax credits.⁶⁰ As one contractor told the *Times-Picayune*, "To me, a lease doesn't work. . . . the business owns the solar. It's more of a money gain for them and less of an energy-savings concept for the homeowner."⁶¹

Solar tax credits promote certain environmental benefits yet perpetuate the logics of propertied wealth accumulation that created the racial wealth gap in privileging homeowners.⁶² In New Orleans, where the difference between white and nonwhite homeownership is 30 percent, African American and Latinx residents are less likely to own homes or have the available cash or credit to buy a solar energy system outright. The racial gap in homeownership has grown in recent years and is now ten percentage points larger than before Hurricane Katrina.⁶³

Housing insecurity is also tied to energy poverty. Where energy expenditures of 6 percent or less of household income are considered affordable, in New Orleans, median energy bills for residents making 80 percent or less of area

mean income cost closer to 10 percent of household income. In particular, African American households and renters pay more than the metro-wide average.⁶⁴ Instead of investing in the resilience of city energy infrastructure or ameliorating housing and energy insecurity for the most vulnerable residents, the tax credit subsidizes individualized accumulation for homeowners and solar leasing companies based on the existing petro-racial capitalist fiscal models that Woods observes have long cost working-class residents in New Orleans.

In this context, we ask whether or how solar energy policy could be differently deployed to empower working-class New Orleans residents and consider how renewable energy policy could also inform and facilitate reparative energy infrastructures. Could policy be implemented with an abolitionist intent to dismantle petro-racial capitalism? We do not assume that a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy will ensure an emancipatory, redistributive, decolonial, or reparative politics,⁶⁵ especially given that solar energy also poses environmental justice concerns of land-use siting, toxic mining, and poor working conditions.⁶⁶ Community solar is a starting point to work toward energy equity; however, to be in line with reparative politics, rather than simply redistribute the profits of renewable energy, requires innovation to ensure community control including inclusive finance, democratic restructuring of utilities, unionization of the solar energy workforce, and addressing environmental injustice in communities that bear the brunt of the energy system's toxic practices, among other concerns. Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan explains that addressing climate change requires a radically different political economic paradigm and solutions "that move us away from extraction and domination and toward cooperation and caring must diversify, democratize, decentralize, reduce consumption, and provide reparations."⁶⁷

We read contemporary policymaking in New Orleans through Woods and Gilmore to contextualize the political possibilities of community solar in New Orleans today within the abolitionist politics that have come before, beginning with the demands for reparations. Woods emphasizes that the generational reproduction of petro-plantation power through dispossession has always faced resistance from Black, working-class organic intellectuals practicing "a way of knowing rooted in the historic redistributive agenda of freedom and labor struggles."⁶⁸ For Woods, this "Blues tradition of ontology, epistemology, and development" implies a way toward a radically new society based on different ways of knowing, organizing, and being in the world.⁶⁹ Gilmore identifies these liberatory ways of knowing and organizing within the Black radical tradition to be abolitionist praxis in which "Abolition is a totality and it is ontological."⁷⁰ Policymaking in the city must be considered within contemporary Black and

Indigenous organizing across the Gulf Coast against pipelines, fracking, and the broader system of petro-racial capitalism that details the centrality of race to global capitalist regimes and demands environmental and energy justice.⁷¹ To contextualize the power and possibility of these politics in New Orleans, we turn to the longer history of reparative politics.

Toward a Politics of Energy Reparations

Reparations have been a pillar of abolitionist politics in the US since the 1830s, gaining form in 1865 when Reverend Garrison Frazier advised Major General William Tecumseh Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton on how to enact emancipation from slavery after the Civil War: “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our labor.”⁷² Frazier’s answer, which was about building assets for formerly enslaved people that would allow for their social reproduction, provides one starting point for discussions about the redistribution of resources needed to redress the uneven racial development created through slavery. Frazier’s pronouncement at a meeting between Black religious leaders and Union Army officials motivated Sherman to issue Special Order 15 from which the language of “40 acres and a mule” comes. Since then, many emancipatory Black political agendas have used this historical moment as a referent, and it set in motion a particular vision of reparations that has preempted other forms of reparational politics, including, as Marable evidenced, more mobilization around “the energy question.” Radical imagining of a different energy system is possible through the abolitionist ontology that appears in these claims, concomitant organizing in New Orleans, and subsequent Black radical politics that emerge from the US South.

Efforts to establish new communities for free people based in real land resources in Louisiana offers insights into policy and community organizing questions that help foreshadow the potential for community solar in New Orleans. A key moment prefiguring abolitionist politics in New Orleans can be traced to February 27, 1865, when the New Orleans Freedmen’s Aid Association was created in an effort to fulfill emancipation for Black people in Louisiana.⁷³ The leadership of the Freedmen’s Aid Association bought land from the government, which held many plantations after the war. This land was then leased to collectively organized groups of Black farmers based on the principle that “the former slaves are entitled by a paramount right to the possession of the soil they had so long cultivated. . . . if the Government will not give them the land, let it be rented to them.”⁷⁴ The cooperative economic model that the association enacted facilitated freed people generating capital

through accumulating cheap shares in self-help banks that began to be leveraged to subsidize and purchase land, farming inputs, and other provisions. Shared laboring and self-governance thus offered a path toward collective self-determination.

In *Black Reconstruction*, W. E. B. Du Bois quotes the *Tribune* on the potential of these new cooperative endeavors, whose ambitions were to

inaugurate a new regime, and for the first time give a chance to field-laborers to obtain their rightful share in the proceeds of the sweat of their brows. Time will bring up a legislation appropriate to the necessities of the case. But now, at the start, we have to prepare the ground, under all disadvantages, for this important economical and social reform.⁷⁵

While the association rented former plantations and worked also to develop a cooperative land model around industrial production in New Orleans, limited monetary resources prevented expansion. When former landowners, bolstered by President Andrew Johnson's white supremacist regime, were allowed to recuperate their land, the Freedmen's Aid Association collapsed. Importantly, this model shows how taxation has been alternatively envisioned to bolster reparations historically. As Du Bois suggested, in the wake of the initial success of Sherman's Special Order 15, "Taxes on the freedmen furnished most of the funds to run these first experiments. On all plantations, whether owned or leased, where freedmen were employed, a tax of one cent per pound on cotton and a proportional amount on all other products was to be collected as a contribution in support of the helpless among the freed people."⁷⁶ In this, and other moments in New Orleans history when reparations were attempted, political control over the distribution of resources determined whether such funds would assist or curtail emancipatory objectives.⁷⁷ These early reparative politics evolved in important ways during the twentieth century that provide historical perspectives for considering energy reparations in New Orleans.

A century later, in 1969, James Forman, who at the time was the head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, proclaimed a "Black Manifesto" that offers another framework to begin to redress the practices of dispossession that racial capitalism fosters. The manifesto contains an expansive list of demands that broadened the discourse around reparations and envisioned new avenues for reparative political organizing. While Foreman's demands included investment in a southern land bank, he also included investments in Black-controlled printing and publishing industries, television networks, research, and skill training centers as well as money targeting national welfare rights organizations and the National Black Labor Strike and defense funds.

These institutionally oriented demands were focused on creating a new Black society through disrupting hegemonic power/knowledge networks.⁷⁸

While energy was not mentioned in Foreman's "Black Manifesto," others recognized the vital role of energy infrastructure that enabled the oppression of Black communities. For instance, in the fall 1964 issue of *Black America*, the Revolutionary Action Movement member Max Stanford wrote, "The Black Revolution will use sabotage in the cities, knocking out the electrical power first, then transportation and guerrilla warfare in the countryside in the South. With the cities powerless, the oppressor will be helpless."⁷⁹

In response to unaddressed social reproductive needs in West Oakland initially, and then other cities across the US, the Black Panther Party (BPP) began survival programs, which offer a generative framework through which to think about the connections between reparations, asset building, and community solar. Huey Newton, one of the founding members of the BPP, outlined the ways the BPP's survival programs worked for Black and disenfranchised households, saying the programs needed to "serve their interests in survival by developing programs which would help them to meet their daily needs. . . . All these programs satisfy the deep needs of the community but they are not solutions to our problems. That is why we call them survival programs, meaning survival pending revolution."⁸⁰ The Free Breakfast for School Children Program was the most well-known BPP program,⁸¹ but it was just one of more than twenty community-focused programs that the BPP organized that included the People's Cooperative Housing Program, a focus on land-banking, People's Free Medical Clinics, and the Sickle-Cell Anemia Program.

The diversity of everyday needs that the BPP sought to address responded to inadequate services in Black communities. Unequal provision of taxpayer-funded public services has also been a central organizing point for the reparations movement, which demands redress for harms caused by slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of institutionalized racial discrimination.⁸² Coates makes these connections clear in "The Case for Reparations," which analyzes one concrete way that abolitionist practices could begin to address discriminatory housing policy that enabled and perpetuated Black land dispossession. Coates acknowledges that violence against African Americans "did not end with slavery" and goes on to show the slow violence embedded in "discriminatory laws [that] joined the equal burden of citizenship to unequal distribution of its bounty. These laws reached their apex in the mid-20th century, when the federal government—through housing policies—engineered the wealth gap, which remains with us to this day." Coates focuses on the 1934 creation of the

Federal Housing Administration to insure private mortgages, which heavily subsidized homeownership for mostly white households and over generations contributed to racialized differences in wealth accumulation. Housing is especially important to discussions of energy, and the quality of housing can determine whether inhabitants are able to afford to heat and cool their homes.⁸³ Not only do lower-income households spend a greater share of their income on energy, but their bills are on average more expensive given that many low-income individuals live in less efficient homes. In particular, renters have limited options to improve efficiency in their homes, and high-energy bills can exacerbate housing insecurity for tenants.⁸⁴

Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton's book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* offers important lessons about how to connect the evolution of reparative politics with novel policy interventions. They suggest, "Modernization is a time of dynamism when it is absolutely necessary to call for and push for new forms, new institutions to solve old problems."⁸⁵ Along these lines, and in thinking about Marable's "energy question," community-engaged energy policy becomes a key avenue to address inequality.⁸⁶ In concluding her 2010 ASA presidential lecture, Gilmore stated, "Policy is the new theory. Policy is to politics what method is to research. It's a script for enlivening some future possibility—an experiment."⁸⁷ Gilmore anchored her discussion of policy in a rich tradition of abolitionist organizing and in so doing offered a more holistic way to connect historically embedded questions of reparations to new policy approaches, explaining, "The abolition I speak of has roots in all radical movements for liberation and particularly in the Black Radical tradition. The abolition I speak of somehow, perhaps magically . . . resists division from class struggle and also refuses all the other kinds of power difference combinations that when fatally coupled, spark new drives for abolition." For Fairchild, energy is a central place to realize abolitionist politics, noting that

energy democracy activists are like the abolitionists: they are building a growing awareness, advocacy, and practice that anchor a new movement with new values about property, profits, power, and privilege. . . . The fight for a sustainable future is therefore also a fight for economic justice. Who will own and control the assets of the renewable energy economy—the harvesting of the sun, wind, and other renewable energy resources. Issues of economic justice get lost when climate discourse is limited to incremental advances like living buildings or greening the economy.⁸⁸

Fairchild makes the case for a democratic renewable energy system, arguing along the lines of Gilmore's abolitionist ontology that "'abolition' from that

economy requires changing norms, values, and strongly held beliefs about property, profit, power, and privilege.”⁸⁹

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, former New Orleans Chapter Black Panther member Malik Rahim and Sharon Johnson established the Common Ground Health Clinic in the spirit of the BPP’s survival programs; Common Ground ultimately served as one of the most notable nodes of help for people recovering from the storm.⁹⁰ To this end, in New Orleans, Woods highlights how “thousands upon thousands of social actions launched by New Orleans residents since Katrina are numerically surpassed only by the actions of the millions of citizens from around the world who have come to their aid,” which suggests that there is a powerful foundation to develop new approaches to policy, including energy policy. Woods links the solidarities that form at the intersections of different campaigns for health care, labor, environmental justice, housing, and others as a way to imagine “reclaiming the commons; seizing assets; and building new public rights and assets.”⁹¹ Another way to think about the prospect of building assets while working toward energy reparations is as a hopeful answer to LaKisha Simmons’s question: “Will the systems of oppression that created the tragic aftermath of the storm ever be addressed by the government? Or, will tradition be upheld?”⁹²

Post-Katrina Community Solar as Reparative and Renewable Energy Development

Today, we see community solar as informing an emancipatory politics that is a concrete and feasible way to address the role of the energy sector in fueling racial capitalism, as Marable argues in raising “the energy question.” Across the US, more than nineteen states have adopted policies to support community solar programs to expand access to solar energy.⁹³ Not all of these programs are redistributive in nature; however, many programs proposed, piloted, or currently in place are designed to support participation of low-income households. Some programs allow low-income customers to pay for subscriptions at a discounted rate; others work to ensure that renters can build credit through continued payment of solar subscriptions on a pay-as-you-go basis. In 2018, following the end of the state tax credit and in the interest of serving the 54 percent of New Orleans residents who rent, New Orleans initiated the first community solar program in the US South.⁹⁴

The New Orleans City Council invited stakeholder input on an initial proposal to design and implement fifty-five megawatts of clean energy through community solar in June 2018.⁹⁵ The council envisioned that the utility En-

tergy, or third-party solar providers, could develop solar on rooftops, capped landfills, or unused land. Provisionally, residents would be able to either purchase a share or subscribe through a lease paid monthly up to the amount of energy needed to power their home with no minimum amount required for low-income residents. At a December 2018 New Orleans City Council meeting, the council advanced a new Community Solar Rule, which, according to Council President Helen Moreno, “would allow individuals to benefit from the power and bill credits that independent solar projects produce without installing panels on their own homes.”⁹⁶ In a news brief, Moreno went on to suggest, “This helps all New Orleanians, especially low-income ratepayers, benefit from solar energy production without outsized installation costs.”⁹⁷ The policy framework opens creative new opportunities to harness new energy futures.

Yet, in this second generation of renewable energy policy for New Orleans, which was initiated from the city as opposed to state government, the Alliance for Affordable Energy, 350 New Orleans, the Sierra Club, solar developers, and other community advocates argued that the program could be designed to do more for low-income residents. In public comment before the council, advocates asserted that the program was long overdue after having first been proposed during the solar construction boom after Katrina. They also demanded greater community engagement to finalize the proposed rule initially put forth by the council’s consultants and questioned the commitment of these consultants to improving the accessibility of solar in New Orleans. In particular, advocates demanded a different measure to calculate bill credits that would provide equal benefits to community solar participants that residential solar owners receive.⁹⁸ These changes would not only allow renters or those without the means to procure solar otherwise to purchase it but also help subscribers erase their utility bills and reduce energy burden. These recommendations align with an abolitionist praxis that reimagines electricity in New Orleans as intentionally directed to housing and energy security, to serve household needs as the BPP had worked toward. We understand that the Community Solar Rules, part of which remains under discussion, could be the beginning of a reparative energy system.

The Community Solar Rules do not explicitly discuss race and instead focus on the class-based language of “low income participation.”⁹⁹ This race-blind language is problematic in New Orleans, where Black households are six times more likely to live in poverty relative to white households, Black workers are three times more likely than white workers to be unemployed, Black households pay more than 8 percent of household income on average in energy bills relative to a citywide average closer to 5 percent, and these disparities can be

traced to racialized policy that historically limited Black people's access to housing, homeownership, and employment.¹⁰⁰ That said, in a city where Black and Brown people are disproportionately low income, the framework embeds several mechanisms to increase participation of all eligible households, including the possibility of waiving the minimum size for a share to participate in the program, waiving participation deposits and up-front fees, and reserving a minimum amount of community solar capacity for low-income subscribers.¹⁰¹

Importantly, this program and other policy changes can be traced to the city council's response to fraudulent actions by Entergy. In March 2018 the New Orleans City Council voted to approve Entergy's plan to build a 210-million-dollar natural gas plant despite two years of sustained community opposition since the plant was first proposed. The plant was further beset by controversy after the *Lens* reported that Entergy paid actors to speak at public hearings in favor of the development. An independent investigation by the New Orleans City Council found Entergy not only paid actors to participate in public meetings but also hired people to spy on grassroots meetings against the plant and demanded employees monitor personal social media feeds regarding local organizing efforts.¹⁰² The city council leveled a five-million-dollar fine for the utility's fraudulent actions, but allowed the power plant to proceed despite the opposition of community-based, energy, and environmental justice organizations, including the Alliance for Affordable Energy, 350 New Orleans, the Sierra Club, Justice and Beyond, VAYLA New Orleans, and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice.¹⁰³ Broader changes to respond to Entergy's tactics, which sought to maintain the status quo of petro-racial capitalism, have also resulted.

One detail that gained intense scrutiny as a result of the *Lens*'s investigative reporting about the Entergy actor scandal was the cost of outside consultants employed by the New Orleans City Council to regulate Entergy. In 2015 the New Orleans Office of Inspector General reported that 96 percent of the city's utility regulatory budget in 2013 was used to cover the fees from these consultants. These expenses totaled 7.5 million dollars in 2013 and were the most expensive set of contracts the council awarded.¹⁰⁴ While Entergy initially paid these fees, they were ultimately recouped by the company from ratepayers on their monthly energy bills. These consultants, who do not live in New Orleans, oversaw most of its energy policy, including regulating how much ratepayers should be charged, what fuel sources for energy generation should be used, and how the city should prepare for outages, including from hurricanes. In light of Entergy's violation of the public's trust and in response to stakeholder pressure from advocates, Moreno initiated a process whereby

the council will invest in developing in-house expertise to assert more local oversight on energy policy.

The extraordinary costs and lack of local control over the utility has been a topic of previous city councils, but there has not been prior action to internalize regulatory oversight. In April 2019 Moreno announced, “There have always been these recommendations about building up the [Council Utilities Regulatory Office] and starting to reduce our consultants, because the amount of money we’re spending just stopped making sense. But for some reason, there was never any action taken on that.”¹⁰⁵ Moreno directed the New Orleans Council Utilities Regulatory Office, made up of the council’s internal staff, to initiate and plan a process through which it can exercise greater regulatory authority over the city’s electric utility. In assuming responsibility and oversight over Entergy, the council is asserting public control and beginning to shift the petro-racial capitalist paradigm that supports the continued expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure subsidized through rate increases that low-income people disproportionately pay. Beginning with these regulatory changes and community solar implementation, the council can use its regulatory powers to work toward energy equity and perhaps, in the future, move toward energy reparations.

This work remains ongoing as evidenced in July 2019, when a coalition of some of the organizations that lobbied for community solar and against Entergy’s proposed gas plant put forward the Resilient and Renewable Portfolio Standard. This new Energy Future New Orleans Coalition includes 350 New Orleans, Alliance for Affordable Energy, Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance, Posigen Solar, the Sierra Club, and Vote Solar, among others, and positions their work as following organizing in the city “since hurricane Katrina in 2005, [as] New Orleanians have advocated for a more equitable city.”¹⁰⁶ The proposed pathway for New Orleans to generate all electricity from renewable sources prioritizes community solar as one policy within an alternative energy system that advances economic and environmental justice.¹⁰⁷ While New Orleans’s community solar program has potential to promote community asset building and work toward energy reparations, an abolitionist approach necessitates not only moving away from fossil fuels but also building community leadership and reworking utility regulation, finance, and procurement and other institutions that reproduce uneven racial development characteristic of petro-racial capitalism.

Conclusion

Petro-racial capitalism requires and reinforces hierarchies through state-supported asset stripping that contributes to “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”¹⁰⁸ The violence within energy systems is embodied in individuals struggling to pay their energy bills, those poisoned by breathing and drinking petro-chemical contaminants, the lives lost through disasters that climate change exacerbates, and in the time expended rebuilding after storms.¹⁰⁹ Drawing a connection between the establishment of the New Orleans Freedmen’s Aid Association to the revolutionary organizing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and for the mobilization around community solar today as working toward energy reparations draws into focus possible mechanisms for reparational politics. Indeed, as Charles P. Henry argues, to be substantively or even symbolically successful, the reparations movement must coalesce and mobilize around concrete goals that can be realized through policy.¹¹⁰ Yet, as Gilmore suggests, if we take seriously that “abolition is a totality and it is ontological,”¹¹¹ we must ask whether such policies are abolitionist or could be mobilized to dismantle petro-racial capitalism.

In this essay, we present a specific argument for energy reparations starting with community solar. Robin D. G. Kelley argues that “the reparations movement exposes the history of white privilege and helps us all understand how wealth and poverty are made under capitalism—particularly a capitalism shaped immeasurably by slavery and racism.”¹¹² This foreshadows a broader argument about the ways in which grassroots organizing can work against the reproduction of petro-racial capitalism to support abolition, as we see beginning with the Energy Future New Orleans Coalition. In this, we take stock of Woods’s dialectically articulated notion of asset stripping to think about how to foster new liberatory policy innovations. Woods says, “Controlling asset stripping requires a comprehensive approach to policy reform that ensures the sustainability of working-class communities and social justice.”¹¹³ Central to this goal is recognizing that while taxation in the US South has tended to strip assets from working-class people, not all forms of taxation are equally regressive. New policies for revenue raising and community control over its distribution can work to undo harms engendered through dispossession and racialized and gendered hierarchies.

New policy innovations based in abolitionist goals of still-to-be-realized emancipation require vigilance and continued organizing against the corrupt practices of utilities like Entergy, which advance petro-racial capitalism without

concern for the planet or people. Here we can see the institutional innovations in the New Orleans City Council taking control of utility regulation and implementing community solar as concrete policies to build community assets and facilitate community control over energy infrastructures. Community solar has the possibility of both creating new institutional networks to build assets and undermining the economic and ecological control of petro-racial capitalism. To this end, it is an easy thought experiment to imagine how far the 147 million dollars Louisiana invested in solar infrastructure for homeowners could go if invested as the start-up costs for community solar projects and how many more people this could help by reducing energy poverty and housing insecurity. The New Orleans Freedmen's Aid Association prefigured forms of collective organizing toward building community-based reparations that the city council could invoke as part and parcel of the geographic imagination of New Orleans's energy future. Perhaps it will be a place where the notion of energy reparations takes hold and helps continue realizing the unfinished goals of emancipation.

Notes

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